

## MY PLACE Sally Morgan

### Synopsis

The autobiographical account of Sally Morgan's discovery of her family's Indigenous roots reads like a well-plotted novel. In 1982, Sally Morgan travelled back to her grandmother's birthplace. What started as a tentative search for information about her family, turned into an overwhelming emotional and spiritual pilgrimage. *My Place* is a moving account of a search for truth into which a whole family is gradually drawn, finally freeing the tongues of the author's mother and grandmother, allowing them to tell their own stories.

### Historical background

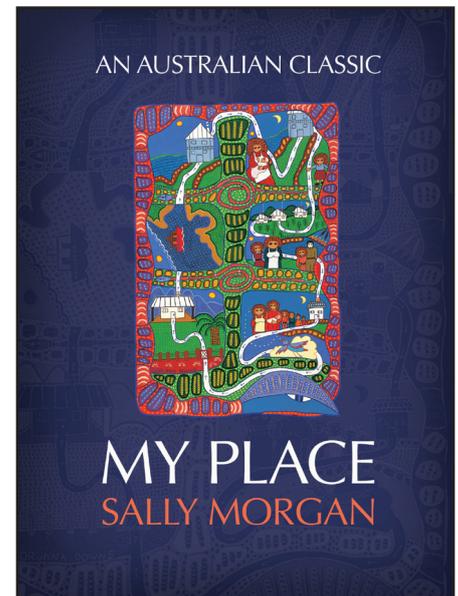
In *My Place*, Sally Morgan writes of her quest to uncover her heritage as an Aborigine, a heritage that had been denied her for many years by her family's insistence that they were not Aboriginal at all. When she says now that she would never feel bitter about the fact that her grandmother and mother had hidden their background from her and her brothers and sisters, she acknowledges, 'It was a survival technique. I can't be bitter about that' (Australian, 11 December 1987). What she discovered as she progressed further and further into her family's history, however, did make her angry. As she explained to Arthur:

... there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them... I mean, our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. I know Nan doesn't agree with what I'm doing. She thinks I'm trying to make trouble, but I'm not. I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story.

Sally Morgan's story is personal — but it is one which links closely with the stories of all Aboriginal people in WA.

... When you take a child away from a native woman she forgets all about it in 24 hours and, as a rule, is glad to get rid of it. (James Isdell, MLA Pilbara, c.1904 [quoted in Welborn, 1978:25])

The history of treatment of Aboriginal people by the white settlers of Western Australia has been one of controversy since the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829. As a



colonial presence in Western Australia, the British Government declared Aborigines their subjects; and as British subjects, Aborigines were entitled to all the rights of protection, as well as the responsibilities afforded by British Law. But barely ten years after the first settlement in 1829, Governor Hutt, newly arrived in Perth, wrote in a letter to Lord Glenelg:

As subjects with ourselves of one and the same sovereign, justice and humanity require that they [Aborigines] should participate with us in the benefit of the leading principles of the English constitution, perfect equality before the law, and full protection of their lives and liberties. But I cannot add properties, because the only substantial property they ever did possess is the soil, over each separate portion of which some individual claims an inherent right, and of this, we have long divested them ...

Aside from his willingness to bend the law in this way, Hutt had also chosen to overlook the already mounting evidence of miscarriage of justice in the colony, and the less than 'full protection of Aboriginal lives and liberties' that the British Government considered necessary. What happened in practice was often quite the opposite. The first official 'punishment raid' on Aboriginal people, for example, took place in May 1830, led by Captain Irwin. According to Stannage (1979:27):

With a detachment of soldiers Irwin attacked an Aboriginal encampment north of Fremantle in the belief that it contained men who had 'broken into and plundered the house of a man called Paton' and killed some poultry ... It seems Paton called together some more whites who, armed with muskets, set after the Aborigines and came upon them not far from the home. 'The tall savage who appeared the Chief showed unequivocal gestures of defiance and contempt' and was accordingly shot. Irwin's course was now clear:

This daring and hostile conduct of the natives induced me to seize the opportunity to make them sensible to our superiority, by showing how severely we could retaliate their aggression.

In the raid which followed over the next few days, more Aborigines were killed and wounded.

This assumption of white superiority over the Aboriginal population remained within the colony, and is characterised by the following entry in the first issue of a Perth annual journal, *The Golden West*, in 1906:

The West Australian Aborigine stands right at the bottom of the class to which we belong. The native black has no intelligence ... He is as a general rule ... brutish, faithless, vicious, ... a natural born liar and a thief ... The Australian black may have a soul, but if he has, then the horse and the dog are infinitely the superior in every way to the black human. (See Stannage 1979:265-266)

By the time this was printed, when Daisy Corunna was living on Corunna Downs and Arthur had already been sent to Perth to be educated at the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission, such attitudes were still common among the white population. Allegations of exploitation, cruelty and violence towards Aborigines had been made locally and in

the British press for the period of nearly sixty years from the first settlement until self-government was granted to Western Australia in 1890. Missionaries like Louis Guistiniani, the Rev. John Gribble, and political figures such as Governor Frederick Weld and Colonel Edward Fox Angelo had made such serious allegations about the ill-treatment of natives that when self-government was granted it was conditional upon the welfare and protection of the natives remaining under the authority of the British Government through the offices of the Aboriginal Protection Board. When the Western Australian Government assumed responsibility for Aboriginal care and protection in 1897, however, allegations of abuse and atrocity continued to appear in local and English newspapers. This resulted, in 1904, in the setting up of the Roth Royal Commission, which was charged to investigate the conditions of Aborigines at work and in general. Conditions for north-west Aborigines were particularly bad. Colonel Angelo had earlier charged that Aborigines were being bought and sold and that two men had advertised their availability in Roebourne, to 'catch niggers for five pounds a head or shoot them for 2/6 each' (see Russo and Schmitt 1984:90). As Wellborn (1987:23) found:

In the north-west Aborigines were recruited for labour under written agreements they often failed to understand. If they ran away they were liable to be sentenced to three months' gaol. Reports indicated deplorable conditions. In 1899 when George Brockman, JP, was fined five pounds for flogging an Aboriginal because he made advances to a black woman on the Brockman property, even the Bulletin objected to the smell of the case and sneered: 'obviously walloping your own nigger is an unconsidered trifle in Groperland'. In reporting a second case of cruelty by Thomas De Pledge, JP, who allegedly flogged a native black woman on her back until the blood flowed, the Bulletin commented: 'The W.A. Government has been thinking in its own slow way for nearly five months about shifting this second brute from the Bench, but he was still there at latest advices'.

Following the Roth Royal Commission, The Aborigines Act of 1905 was passed in the WA parliament. This was a very repressive and harsh Act, discriminating severely against Aboriginal people. Aborigines were not permitted to enter hotels; they had to obtain permission before they could travel from one district to another; they could be involuntarily rounded up and placed in institutions, like those at Turkey Creek, Carrolup and the Moore River Native Settlement, near Moora, where hundreds of Aboriginal people were forced to live between about 1914 up until the 1950s. 'Aboriginal parents were not the legal guardians of their own children; the Chief Protector of Aborigines was ... Permission had to be sought from the Chief Protector before a non-Aborigine could marry an Aborigine ... Aborigines could not apply for bank loans, or obtain relief or financial help from any welfare or other institutions except the Aborigines Department. (Tillbrook 1985:25) This Act was amended twice, in 1911 and 1936, each time making it even more repressive.

The 1936 amendment, for example, resulted from another enquiry into Aboriginal affairs, in 1934, by H.D. Moseley, whose chief causes for concern were the growth of the part-Aboriginal population (from 900 in 1905 to 3,891 in 1934) and the increasing number of leprosy among Aborigines. In 1947, F.E. Batemen conducted yet another inquiry into Aboriginal affairs in WA, and recommended the improvement or abandonment of the government Native Settlements and the inclusion of Aboriginal children in the State

Schools system. This became effective in 1949, even though education had first become compulsory in WA in 1871, when the Elementary Education Act compelled all children within a 3 mile radius of a State School to attend, except for Aboriginal children. Their education was left to missionaries, but it was not until 1874 that missions were able to receive a government subsidy for Aboriginal children in their care. In 1888, a Native and Half-Caste Mission was opened at Middle Swan, under the direction of the Orphanage Board of the Church of England. This was where Arthur Corunna and his brother Albert were sent in the early 1900s. The Mission was housed in a building now part of the Swanleigh Anglican Hostel - Cornwell House. In his history of Swanleigh, A.R. Peterkin (1986:32-34) writes:

Records of the mission's progress up to 1902 are difficult to find, but from a report in that year we know that the enrolment then was 48 girls and boys, of which 11 of the older boys resided in the nearby Boys' Orphanage. The total staff of the Mission was two ladies who were sisters. Miss Effie Mackintosh was the Matron and Miss Jeannie Mackintosh was the teacher...

The Report also mentions that much now needed doing to the original building, because whenever there was heavy rain there was a great inrush of water that flooded the dormitories - which must have been a very trying situation for staff and children alike. The next year, however, structural improvements were successfully carried out ... Later the conditions in the Mission were further improved by a brick addition to the original building that included new staff quarters and a kitchen and dining room...

In 1907 the Misses Mackintosh decided to retire. By now they had grown old in the service that must at times have been heartbreakingly difficult, because so many of their charges came to them neglected and sickly. Despite the devoted attention these children received ... quite a number succumbed to illness and disease. With such a poor health and educational background, the work ... called for tremendous devotion to their cause by the two ladies ... 'Of twenty-one girls sent out into the world during the last ten years,' says the 1909 Report, 'two have died, fifteen are doing well, and only four have turned out badly'. Under the circumstances it was a commendable record.

The resignation of the Misses Mackintosh was followed by several changes of appointment until in 1911 Mr J. Jones, formerly of the Boys Orphanage staff, and his wife were appointed... A married couple as overseers was considered necessary because the State Department for Native Welfare had decided that its older boys were now to leave the Orphanage and live at the Mission.

The Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission had only twelve children enrolled in 1920, and it was closed at the end of that year.

Parkerville Children's Home, where Gladys Corunna lived as a child, was established in 1903 by Sister Kate and Sister Sarah of the Anglican Order the 'Sisters of the Church'. This was a teaching order established in 1870 with the special intention of helping with education in the Colonies. They had arrived in Fremantle in 1901 with twenty-two young children aged between 6 and 10, whom they had brought from English institutions as the State's first official child migrants. While others of their Order set about the establishment of founding a Church School (now Perth College), Sister Kate and Sister Sarah began what

was then called the 'Waifs' House' at Parkerville, in the beautiful hills district. From the start it was a home for destitute children, and in 1904 the first of the 'cottages' was built. The children lived in these houses, under the care of a House Mother, in groups of about sixteen boys and girls of varying ages. George Turner cottage where the young Gladys Corunna lived was a gift from the Theatrical and Amusement Employees Association in 1929. One cottage, 'Babyland', was given over the care of all the children of kindergarten age and younger.

The Sisterhood, under Sister Kate's direction, owned and ran Parkerville until about 1930, when it was incorporated under the control of a committee called the Parkerville Association. In 1932 the Association decided that the 72-year-old Sister Kate should retire, but this was against her better judgement, and within two years she had left Parkerville and set up a new home for part-Aboriginal children, 'Sister Kate's' in Queens Park, which she ran till her death in 1946. As is noted by Sally Morgan, children at Sister Kate's were initially 'sent to her by the West Australian government authority responsible for Aborigines'. It may be that it was only the fact that Gladys remained at Parkerville that allowed her to escape the rigid policing of her life and affairs by the Department of Native Affairs which was the norm for most Aborigines and part-Aborigines. Gladys says:

When I was quite young, Sister Kate left Parkerville and took a lot of Aboriginal children with her. I was very sad, because I lost a lot of my friends. There were a few lightly-coloured Aboriginal boys left and they kept an eye on me. I don't know why I wasn't sent with Sister Kate, maybe it was because of the Drake-Brockmans, I don't know.

Whatever the reason, Gladys may have escaped the official stigmatisation of being classified as an 'official' half-caste by being left out of the group that was taken to Sister Kate's. This would have made it possible in her later life to avoid being publicly recognised as Aboriginal, in a way that could never have occurred had she been sent to the 'Aboriginal' home. Because the Aborigines Act, now renamed the Native Administration Act since 1936, was so stringent on the control of Aborigines, the overwhelming fear and worry of Daisy Corunna (and later, Gladys herself) that the Milroy children would be taken away if they were 'found out' is easily understood.

As well as changing the name of the Act, the 1936 Amendment 'revealed an intense, official concentration on the control of individual Aborigines. The commissioner remained the legal guardian of Aborigines, and the Minister was still empowered to take Aborigines into custody and confine them in settlements without recourse to trial or appeal'. (Long 1979:360) The Department of Native Affairs had been made responsible for the education of Aboriginal children in this Amendment; though without provision of funds with which to do this, church establishments like Sister Kate's home would have provided the Department with one means of carrying out its directions in this area. At the same time, missions and homes for part-Aboriginal children were also deemed desirable from the point of view of separating these 'part-white' children from the influence of Aborigines.

In 1905, the beginnings of what was later to become the Federal White Australia Policy emerged at the federal conference of the Labour Party, which ratified a policy of cultivating 'an Australian sentiment based on the maintenance of racial purity'. With

regard to the native inhabitants of the country this was not thought to present a great problem, as they were considered to be a dying race. Indeed, from an estimated 52,000 before white settlement in 1829, the population of Aboriginal people in WA had fallen to 5,621 in 1901. Ninety per cent of them had died. According to the conveniently topical Darwinian Theory of Evolution, they were destined to retreat before 'a higher race', and would inexorably 'die out in any case' (Welborn, 1978:28). As Arthur Corunna said in *My Place*:

Aah, I always wish I'd never left there. It was my home. Sometimes, I wish I'd been born black as the ace of spades, then they'd never have took me. They only took half-castes.

Natives were considered by many white people to be morally inferior, and incapable of bringing up the children of non-Aboriginal fathers. Part-Aboriginal children were compulsorily interned at the government settlements if not put into the care of missionaries.

The settlements became dumping grounds for illegitimate part-Aboriginal children compulsorily separated from their parents, for 'troublesome natives' (apprehended and confined without trial), and for men and women suffering from venereal disease. These settlements became places of misery, looked upon with horror and dread by all Aborigines in Western Australia. As these establishments were still operating in the 1950s, corporate memory of their existence is still fresh. (Long 1979:359)

It is obvious, therefore, that Nan's fears were real, even though inconceivable to the young Sally Milroy who even as a teenager 'knew nothing about Aboriginal people'.

... whenever we brought our friends home to play after school, Nan would disappear ...  
... You'd not to keep bringing people inside, Sally. You got no shame. We don't want them to see how we live.'  
'Why not?'  
'People talk, you know, we don't want people talkin' about us. You dunno what they might say!'

They were baffled by the workings of the government or its bureaucracies. Whenever there were difficulties, rather than tackle the system directly, they'd taught us it was much more effective to circumvent or forestall it.

When Nan says to Sally, 'In this world, there's no justice, people like us'd all be dead and gone now if it was up to this country', her bitterness at the whole Aboriginal people's loss of 'their place', Western Australia, suggests that Sally in writing the story of the search for her own, has paid a fitting tribute to her heritage and the hope that, as Arthur says 'People read history, don't they?'

## Discussion points

- Do you experience a sense of belonging to a place, or an attachment to a particular location? Why, or why not?

- What factors change how you experience a place, whether your home or an area you have visited?
- How were Aboriginal people perceived in the community/s in which you grew up?
- In what ways have perceptions of Aboriginal people changed over your lifetime?
- Talk about any personal experiences you have had with Indigenous Australian culture.
- How was the history of Australia taught to you in school?
- Did reading *My Place* open your eyes to any historical events that you were unaware of?
- Sally's family feature large in her experience. How do different family members reflect or shape her identity? Do you relate to her family life?
- How significant is it that the stories of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy are written down in their own words?
- How do Sally's relationships with her family change after she begins her journey of discovering her family's history?